

The Cambridge Greek Play Experience by Amaya Chandler

The Cambridge Greek play is a tradition stemming from 1882; since then hundreds of Cambridge students have been involved in the triennial productions - war poet Rupert Brooke having performed in the *Oresteia*. As a lover of tragedy, I was delighted when I found out that I had been cast in *Trojan Women*, but on discovering that we were expected to perform an entire play in Ancient Greek, the terror set in! Thankfully it wasn't as hard as I'd feared; a significant number of the cast, which included a strong Queens' contingent, were non-Greek speakers, and with the help of Antony Bowen's transliteration, and director Jane Montgomery's audio-cassettes, we managed to get to grips with the Euripidean text. And to the more sceptical members of the audience - we did know what we were saying.

Trojan Women is a "blistering attack on the inhumanity of war". Hecuba, the Queen of fallen Troy, bemoans the fate of her family and city amid a Chorus of women prisoners, each waiting to discover her respective fate. After learning that one of her daughters, Cassandra, the cursed priestess, is to be made the concubine of King Agamemnon, Hecuba is then informed that her other daughter, Polyxena has been slaughtered as a sacrifice in honour of Achilles. Her only remaining hope, that one day her grandson Astyanax might avenge the destruction of her city, is dashed when she watches the boy dragged from his mother's arms to be thrown from the walls of Troy.

Our production sought to "combine a wealth of modern resources with the power and lyricism of the original drama". Jane Montgomery abandoned traditional white sheets and static speechifying in favour of a more violent visual and audio approach. Both the women prisoners and their Greek captors showed disturbing physical scars of war, while their bitter and despairing laments expressed an even more potent inner suffering. The set was a desolate swimming-pool to whose bloodstained walls the Chorus, which included Catherine Montgomery, were chained by various limbs. Their wretched yet powerful singing of Bulgarian-influenced original compositions by Keith Clouston offered the emotional climaxes of the production; in the words of Oliver Taplin, who reviewed the production in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "song flowers from the flames of Troy, from the dust of grief". As Cassandra, Zoë Svendsen stunned the audience when she entered dragging a blazing wedding-cake onto the stage dressed in a sinister wedding-dress cum strait-jacket. Meanwhile, as Andromache, the symbol of perfect motherhood, I looked like a mangled Doris Day in my shredded fifties-style gingham dress. Backstage, Anne Smart, as Stage Manager, and Sally Wrench, as Assistant Stage Manager, did a brilliant job in keeping a very technical production as smooth running as possible.

Trojan Women offered a fantastic opportunity for a student cast and production team to work amongst professionals on what was a long term and large scale production. Performing twice a day to audiences of up to 500 in the excellently equipped Arts Theatre was an amazing and wholly absorbing experience, while the intensive and demanding rehearsal schedule meant that there was more time for cast-bonding than that proffered by most student shows. The production, despite a minor few hitches with the 'Corridor of Fate' and the ultimate blood-shower, was a resounding success; Oliver Taplin hailed it as "thoughtful, brave and moving... so much is so effective and intelligently worked through that Silviu Purcarete's recent *Oresteia* at the Barbican seems more like a workshop in comparison". It was a challenging, exciting and rewarding experience enjoyed by all involved; whether the play achieved a cathartic effect on the audience is for them to decide, but it certainly worked wonders on the cast, who, having purged their emotions on stage in a tumult of despair, had a great time dancing to Bulgarian folk songs in the Green Room!